

# The University Heights Messenger

March 21, 2010

## The Letter To Philemon

By Robert Turner with slight changes

In the Colossian letter (4:7-8), Paul names Tychicus as his messenger and says he is sending with him (v. 9) "Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you." The letter is written from prison (4:3, 18), where Aristarchus was "fellow-prisoner" (v. 10). Epaphrus was also with Paul when the Colossian letter was written (v. 12) and had evidently been sent from Colossae with messages, and to assist Paul (1:7-8).

These things tie the Colossian and Philemon letters closely together for both come with salutations from Paul and Timothy from prison. In Philemon Onesimus is a run-away slave who had been converted by Paul while in prison, and was now being sent back to his master.

Before continuing read **Ephesians 6:5-9** and **Colossians 3:22-25**. Evidently Onesimus had subscribed to such principles, but what about Philemon? The slave must face his reason for running away and its consequences. We may speculate that the above passages were written with Onesimus in mind--not for his sake alone (these exhortations are not in the letter to Philemon) but for master-slave relations of all times.

What follows is NOT a translation; it is not the Bible text but the non-critical meaning I get from reading the text. It is offered to introduce the comments that will follow. Perhaps it will assist you in better understanding Paul's letter to Philemon.

*Paul, a prisoner for Christ's sake; to Philemon, "dearly beloved and fellow laborer," and to intimate members of the church in your house. I keep hearing of your love and faith toward the Lord and all saints; and I thank God, and pray that the sharing of your faith may cause others to know our blessings in Christ. I rejoice because you have refreshed the hearts of other saints.*

*Now, I do not order you (as an Apostle might), but as an aged prisoner of the Lord, I*

*beseech you on behalf of your slave Onesimus (now a fellow saint), whom I have brought to the Lord. He who was once unprofitable (belying his name, which means "profitable") has been profitable to me, and can be to you. In sending him to you I give up my heart (I love him like a son). I long to keep him with me, for he could have served me in your stead in the bonds of the gospel. But I would not do this without your consent, for goodness should not be taken from you, but freely given by you.*

*Perhaps this was why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever; as a beloved brother to you as he is to me.*

*If you count me as your partner receive him as you would me. If he has wronged you or owes you anything, put it to my account, even though you owe me even your own self. Yes brother (I acknowledge it) I do beg your help in the Lord (as you have helped the hearts of other saints). I have confidence in your obedience, knowing that you will do more than I say.*

*I trust that through your prayers I may be released from prison and come to you, so get ready for my stay. Various saints salute you. The grace of our Lord be with your spirit.*

The personal nature of this letter is striking. The whole epistle was likely written in Paul's hand (v. 19). He may have written many such letters but this is the only one preserved. Commendations of Philemon found throughout are not for the purpose of flattery, nor are they related to wealth or worldly position. They are prayer material, praising his service to God and its good effect.

Paul beseeches Philemon gently, though there certainly is a hint of authority present in his words. Without denying that it existed, he willingly set it aside in order to appeal to Philemon as an old friend and fellow prisoner for the Lord's sake.

Recognition of "rights" in this matter are dual: those which the social order of the day dictated, and that which is expected of saints. The first century society gave Philemon rights

over his slave, and Paul did not paint a banner and take to the streets against those “rights.” As Robertson says, “*Paul has been criticized for not denouncing slavery in plain terms. But when one considers the actual conditions in the Roman empire, he is a wise man who can suggest a better plan than the one pursued here for the ultimate overthrow of slavery.*” Paul imposed, in gentle but unmistakable fashion, the “right” things for both Philemon and Onesimus to do as Christians.

Paul could not “force” Philemon to free Onesimus for our weapons are not carnal (2 Corinthians 10:4-f). But truth, properly applied, can “**bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.**” Could Paul have altered the Roman Law regarding slavery (which was quite brutal) there is every reason to believe he would have done so. But he did not neglect the greater power, divine principles planted in the hearts of men like Philemon, which could and did doom the pagan concept of slavery. As one man wrote, “*We are all Christ’s Onesimus if we believe it.*” God speed the day when more men will be His slave.

### **IN NEED OF PRAYERS:**

**Esmeralda Agustin** is struggling spiritually. A letter from the congregation has been sent to her.

**Glenn Kimberlin** is unable to be with us due to health issues.

**Rachel Crawford’s** aunt, Gail Stein, is in the midst of her treatments for breast cancer.

**Jackson Spivey** has been fighting a fairly serious bug of some sort. **Jacob** possibly has contracted it as well.

**Taylor Osterling** is still in the hospital though he is now in rehab preparing for discharge. It should be about four more weeks.

**Shannon Gilbert** is receiving treatments for breast cancer.

**Rachel Knollman** begins the second phase of her treatments (self injections at home) tomorrow.

**Kendra Albertson** is struggling with an eating disorder. She is improving and has started eating more regularly.

**Robert Brundige**, Richard’s brother, is in Parkside Manor in Cynthiana dealing with some issues. **Sarah** Brundige, Richard’s mother, is in Cambridge Place Nursing Home and in need of our prayer.

Let’s also remember **David Day and his wife, Michelle Oxendine, Ron Catchen, Chuck McDavitt, and David Blakeman.**

### **UPCOMING EVENTS:**

Our meeting with Wayde Miller begins today. Let’s remember to clear our own schedules and to invite others each night.

I will be speaking at West Mason in Cincinnati through Wednesday.

### **BIBLE READING SCHEDULE FOR 2/21-27:**

**Sunday:** Lev 2-4, Ps 46, Luke 10

**Monday:** Lev 5-6, Ps 47, Luke 11

**Tuesday:** Lev 7, Ps 48, Luke 12

**Wednesday:** Lev 8-9, Ps 49, Luke 13

**Thursday:** Lev 10-11, Ps 50, Luke 14

**Friday:** Lev 12-13, Ps 51, Luke 15

**Saturday:** Lev 14, Ps 52, Luke 16

### **SERMON TOPICS:**

Sunday AM. The Philippian mind

Sunday PM. The locusts in the darkness

### **CLASS INFORMATION:**

Lesson 12, II, A, 1 (1 Peter 2:1-2)